General Introduction

Today, environmental problems threaten not only natural ecological qualities but also humanity’s very existence. This collection of readings demonstrates the importance of anthropological theory and practice for solving environmental problems. In making selections from a large body of excellent work, we searched for highly readable articles that touch on the breadth of environmental issues on which anthropologists work. Our search found that today’s anthropology of the environment is changing rapidly. Anthropologists are deploying new research methods, new interdisciplinary collaborations, and new theories to make sense of environmental problems and people’s responses to them. Given these innovations and the growing size of the literature, no reader can offer more than a sample. The readings we have chosen address some of the key environmental questions of the 21st century. These include the socio-ecological effects of population growth, economic development and underdevelopment, consumption, globalization, and biodiversity conservation as well as the role of identities in shaping human-environment interactions. In order to tackle these questions, this volume offers a mix of practical case studies, theoretical debate, and discussion of moral and ethical issues.

New to this second edition, we have added discussion questions to every section. These questions vary in their difficulty and are intended to help readers capture the key points from each chapter and to bring the work of the many authors included into conversation with one another. Additional discussion questions and activities are included in a separate “Instructor’s Guide.”

Section 1 presents an overview and background of today’s anthropological approaches to the environment. Students will find that many of the ideas in this section reappear, sometimes in new guises, in later contributions. Discussions of theory continue in the following sections, each of which includes one chapter authored by a prominent theorist. The sections then include examples of academic and popular reporting of cases and issues, followed by a polemical piece offering a contrarian position and a chapter that gives an ethical reflection.

Investigative pieces offer broad descriptions of environmental problems, often using aggregate statistics. Case studies of current research and action focus attention on the specific ways people are working through, or failing to address, environmental problems. The polemical pieces present opposing information to challenge other contributions, to spark discussion, and to provide critical perspective. Finally, ethical discussions demonstrate that all environmental issues rest on larger questions of social justice, humanity’s place in the world, and fundamental ideas about
what it means to be human. We hope readers will use the ethical arguments to reflect on the moral underpinnings of their own approach to environmental issues.

In order to fit so much material into an affordable reader, we have abridged the original publications. In making editorial choices, we sought to retain coherence in the authors’ original argumentation and maintain a narrative flow. We encourage readers intrigued by a particular selection to return to the publication’s original version to gain a fuller sense of the complete work.

This reader as a whole demonstrates three themes that link the topical sections. The first is the diversity of approaches to understanding environmental problems. People throughout the world face environmental crises. However, environmental issues are perceived differently by people of distinct genders, races, classes, and cultural orientations. People disagree about the content of problems and what they mean to the groups affected by them. These disagreements deeply affect the ways environmental problems are solved and by whom.

A second theme is the need for creative inquiry that finds possibilities within the limits of different knowledge structures. If no single approach is a cure-all for environmental problems, then we might question how far any theory or method can take us in understanding and resolving a situation. We may find that a theory that helps in explanation is less useful in the development of practical solutions. We may find a need for multiple explanatory theories. In any case, rather than view the diversity of environmental problems and proposed solutions as leading to a stalemate, students of anthropology will find themselves uniquely positioned to develop creative intellectual and practical responses to this diversity.

The third theme is the importance of personal action in the face of environmental problems. Students are often most familiar with environmental activism centered on recycling, litter removal, and rain forest protection. Some authors here point to the need for broader forms of activism, and they make clear suggestions for change. Other authors propose or imply the need for political solutions. Transparently or not, an author’s ethical position always informs her or his writing. The readings on morality and ethics are meant to help students link moral positions to the solutions proposed by other authors.

Also new to this second edition is a section on applied work and scholar-advocacy. Formulating an effective personal response to environmental problems is difficult, especially as solutions are often depicted as an onerous number of small tasks (“100 Things You Can Do to Save the Environment”). The moral, ethical, political, and practical discussions presented in this section are intended to help students get beyond the dizzying number of environmental problems and solutions.

We believe that a combination of theory, empirical research, and ethical debate may offer the most powerful anthropological response to environmental problems. In this sense, we hope these readings serve as tools for those whose concern for ecological issues pushes them beyond cursory analyses to a more comprehensive approach.